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# Italy

# Biotechnology

# Italian Scientists ask the Political Leadership for a Positive Stan on GMOs

# 2006

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**Report Highlights:** A group of prominent Italian scientists, known as “Galileo 2001”, has written an open letter to the two major candidates seeking the post of Prime Minister of Italy in the April national elections. These scientists use the letter to “put the question” of where the politicians stand on the important issue of biotechnology.

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A group of prominent Italian scientists, known as “Galileo 2001”, has written an open letter to the two major candidates, Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi, seeking the post of Prime Minister of Italy in the April national elections. These scientists use the letter to “put the question” of where the politicians stand on the important issue of biotechnology, and make the case for why it is important for Italy to have access to and use of GMOs in agriculture.

“Galileo 2001” includes some of Italy’s most respected scientists. This scientists’ association was formed in 2001 to promote and stimulate political and cultural debate on problems connected to science, research and technological development. Their aim is to bring to the attention of the decision makers, particularly members of the Italian Parliament, qualified advice on technical and scientific matters.

The text of the letter, translated into English, follows below.

Begin letter:

December, 17, 2005
open letter to:
The Hon. Silvio BERLUSCONI
The Hon. Romano PRODI

Subject: Genetically Modified Plants (GMOs): Which Policy?

With the upcoming political elections, the Association Galileo 2001 asks the candidates for the office of Prime Minister to express their position on the current controversy regarding scientific research on genetically modified agricultural products and the growing of GM plants in our country.

Scientific research developed over the last twenty years by different countries in the world (USA, Canada, China, India, South Africa, Argentina and others) has already produced a number of GM plants with enhanced genetic traits. Today these crops occupy 90 million hectares worldwide and this figure is constantly increasing.

Currently, GM plants are successfully contributing to increased yields, improved quality of the agricultural products, decreased application of pesticides and the preservation of the environment. In the near future, they are expected to lead to the creation of vaccines and vegetable products with improved nutritional qualities. This is all attested by scientific and agricultural economic research.

The national and international scientific community has repeatedly expressed its position in favor of a rational adoption of GM plants, describing as ideological and scientifically groundless the arguments of people in Italy and in some other European countries who oppose this new approach to the genetic improvement of crops.

In 2004, the 21 most significant Italian scientific societies working in the agronomic field and representing over 10,000 scientists signed and publicized a Consensus Document on "Food Safety and GMOs". After a careful examination and evaluation of scientific publications on this subject and of the statements of many International (and Italian) Academies of Science and other relevant international institutions, the document concludes: "All GMOs on the market are safe and any Manichean (sic. One assumes this means a dualistic acceptance of mumbo-jumbo yet participating in a modern world of science - translators comment) approach should be laid aside and replaced by a rational approval, based on correct scientific information.”

For almost twenty years the EU has funded careful scientific research on the safety of GMO technology, conducted by the most prestigious European research institutes. In 2001, presenting the results of this research, Philippe Busquin, the EU Commissioner for Scientific Research, wrote: “GM crops and food are safer than the traditional ones, because they are the product of a more precise technology and are more thoroughly tested by public assessments”. Before receiving the authorization to be grown and commercialized, GM plants have to get through a number of tests which assess their health and environmental safety [Please note that these tests are not required for traditionally grown plants, although the practices of traditional genetic improvement (selection, hybridization, mutation) are known to be open to risks for the human health and the environment].

Please remember that our Government strongly wanted - and finally achieved - the establishment of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in Parma. EFSA is a highly qualified agency with the institutional task of providing the competent political authorities (EU institutions with political accountability, i.e. European Commission, European Parliament and Council) with definitive scientific assessments for each GM product seeking to be authorized for cultivation and commercialization.

Galileo 2001 has noted that the scientific information rarely reaches public opinion or even our political authorities. Much more frequent are groundless claims of possible safety risks associated with GM products and wrongly presented as scientific truth. "Capturing the headlines", these announcements alarm the public, thus achieving the desired political effect. It is impossible to explain in the present letter all the false arguments with which GMOs have been associated over the years. On the other hand, it is useful to point out some of the most widespread ones, together with the answers provided by the scientific community.

It has been stated that:

-“Scientific evidence shows that a single gene is not sufficient to create an hereditary character; a gene can specify more than one protein. Therefore, we do not know what will happen with genetically modified plants”. All molecular biologists know that this statement is misleading. Today we know that some genes can induce the synthesis of different fragments of the same protein, but this can not happen when an exogenous gene is introduced into genetically modified plants: the genes used in the genetic modification of plants always specify only one protein.

-“The safety of genetically modified food was contradicted by the results of trials conducted on laboratory rats fed with Mon863 corn.” EFSA already expressed its official position on this serious charge reported by the mass media, stating that Mon863 corn does not indicate concerns about its safety and that the placing on the market of Mon863 corn is unlikely to have an adverse effect on human and animal health or the environment in the context of its proposed use. In fact, no statistically relevant differences - beyond the limits of normal biological variability - were noticed between rats fed with Mon863 corn and rats fed with conventional corn.

-“Genetic contamination could become a dangerous and irreversible form of ecosystem alteration. The pollen of genetically modified maize which could be grown in the North of Italy for animal consumption would provoke an environmental disaster.” Field trials conducted in the Lombardy Region, but also in Spain and in other countries, show that it is simple to draw guidelines for different agro-ecosystems respecting the EU threshold of 0,9% for coexistence and responding to the interests of farmers. A distance of 25-50 meters between neighboring fields of maize has proven to be enough to avoid crosspollination.

-"Genetically modified plants can cause allergic reactions." As a matter of fact, genetically modified plants are the only plants on the market that are tested and certified to be "allergy free". This is not true for non-GM plants, which can be commercialized even if they contain allergens. Kiwi, for example, contains 15 known allergens.

-"Genetically modified plants are controlled by a few multinationals." Nowadays GM plants are independently developed and grown by many countries. China, India, South Korea and South Africa are heavily investing in R&D on agrobiotechnology. In Italy, instead, we are failing to take into consideration this aspect of world technological development. If our country does not change its attitude, we will become evermore dependent on foreign genetically modified products, without being able to produce and control them.

-"Italy must defend the quality of its typical products from the threat posed by genetically modified products." Actually, it is the very refusal of new technology that is leading Italy to lose one by one its high quality typical products. San Marzano tomato, the apple grown in Valle d'Aosta, Carnaroli rice and many other important Italian crops are at risk of dying out: the parasites which attack them have become more aggressive and resistant to pesticides. In Italy genetically modified varieties of these crops resistant to the attacks of pests have been already developed. The results obtained include better quality and productivity as well as a reduction in the use of chemical treatments. Unfortunately, current Italian legislation does not allow the cultivation of these varieties.

-"It is in the interests of Italy to focus on organic GM-free agriculture." Today organic farming only accounts for 2.5 percent of the whole market: what are we going to do with the remaining 97.5 percent?

-"There is not enough scientific evidence to guarantee that there will not be negative consequences in the future." As in all other human activities, it is impossible to be absolutely certain of the total absence of risk, and this also applies to conventional and organic agriculture. Yet, we have so far accumulated more information on the present and future safety of GM plants than is now available on traditional agricultural products.

The Precautionary Principle is often invoked. On the 18th of June 2004 the National Committee on Bioethics (CNB) expressed its worry about the risk of exploitation and abuse of this principle. In the official document approved with unanimity and titled "The Position of CNB on 'The Precautionary Principle': Bioethical, Philosophical and Legal Aspects", the Committee states that "It is necessary to watch out for every abuse of the Precautionary Principle, which some zealous supporters would always impose. It is fundamental to provide instead a sensible interpretation of that principle, which has to be strictly applied only when an actual risk is identified - though not yet thoroughly assessed - by the community of experts." The Association Galileo 2001 agrees in full with this position. The Precautionary Principle is meant to regulate our activities, but it can not be turned into a means to block them, by allowing "zealous supporters" to arbitrarily assess the risks and to fulfill a task which falls within the competence of the scientific community. The truth is that there is nothing in genetically modified plants which makes them dangerous in themselves, nor is there scientific evidence that GMOs grown today represent a danger for human beings and the environment. Instead, the benefits brought by GM plants to different sectors of modern agriculture and to many countries in the world are ever clearer.

The current opposition to genetically modified plants derives to a large extent from emotional and ideological factors. These affect an impartial approach when considering the issues related to GMOs. Only having more faith in scientific research, which exclusively relies on certain and accurate facts, and promoting factual scientific information, it will be possible to evaluate the actual significance of this new technology. Researchers, in particular those

working for public institutions, are providing a service to the national community and place themselves at the disposal of its democratically elected representatives. Therefore, the concerned political authorities have the responsibility to choose: to encourage groundless fears or the rigor of the scientific method. The stakes are high: to give our agricultural production and industry the possibility to effectively compete in the ever-growing and globalized market.

Your kind reply to the Association Galileo 2001 will be highly appreciated.

Best regards,

Renato Angelo RICCI, President

Giorgio SALVINI, Honorary President
Umberto VERONESI, Honorary President

Franco BATTAGLIA, Vicar Vice-President
Carlo BERNARDINI, Vice-President
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Rodolfo FEDERICO, Ordinary Professor of Vegetable Physiology at the University of Rome Three
Francesco SALA, Ordinary Professor of Botany and Director of the Botanical Gardens at the University of Milan

End Letter.